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ABSTRACT

A survey of state education agencies (SEA's) in Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, supported by a random sampling of SEA's elsewhere in the nation, revealed several aspects of education in which the publics of all the surveyed states expressed low confidence. This document identifies eight of these issues, indicating the messages being received from the public regarding each. The document then itemizes the messages needing to be sent to the public to clarify the values and successes of education; useful data sources for preparing these messages; and alternative actions that SEA's can take to respond positively to responsible criticisms. The eight issues covered are student achievement, the cost of education, teacher preparation and effectiveness, student discipline and behavior, dropouts, lack of public information concerning schools, the needs of special populations, and the relationship of educational costs to benefits. (PGD)

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STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issues and Action Alternatives

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers of the States of Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Washington

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INTRODUCTION

Diminished public confidence in education is of deep concern to educators, not primarily because they like to be appreciated and applauded—though of course they do!—but because lack of public confidence handicaps education by denying it needed support, both fiscal and psychological.

Furthermore, if public support for education is at a low ebb, this lack of confidence may well indicate that the schools are indeed deficient in meeting some of the needs of individuals and of the society as a whole. Even unjustified complaints serve as a signal that the schools need to send out clearer messages regarding their work and their successes.

The Northwest Chiefs have asked the NWREL Center for State Policy Studies in Education to help identify four aspects of the lack-of-confidence problem:

1. What messages are we receiving which indicate lack of public confidence in or understanding of education?

2. What messages need to be sent to the public which would be reassuring—that the schools are, in fact, recognizing and effectively addressing identified problems, often with notable success?

3. What are useful and appropriate data sources for these messages which should go out to the concerned public?

4. What are alternative responsive actions which State Education Agencies can take to assure that public education, along with public confidence, can be strengthened in response to responsible criticisms?

To secure state-by-state data for answering these questions, Northwest Chiefs and their staffs were interviewed by representatives from the Center. Because of the uniqueness of the problems of each state, it had been anticipated that the data secured would vary from state to state. Quite understandably it did, in many specific ways, but there was found also a remarkable consistency in at least one area: the messages coming in to the SEAs showed a clear pattern of public concern, fairly well distributed and uniform throughout the region.

To gain some indication of whether the problems encountered, and the solutions proposed, were national as well as regional, telephone conversations were held with representative Chiefs across the country. In every case, the problems with lack of public confidence in education were much the same, though SEA activities for addressing these problems varied, appropriate to the peculiar needs of each state.

As the inquiry proceeded, it became evident that more important than specific SEA activities for increasing public confidence was the general stance taken: that the more the various publics could be involved in the policy-setting process, the more they understood education and its problems. From this understanding, confidence developed.

The materials on the pages below have been purposely condensed to give a one-page overview of each of the major "confidence" problems. An appendix (now being prepared) will give much fuller data sources for sending back to the public the messages which will tend to bolster confidence in the job education is doing.

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Student achievement is poor and getting worse."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. Actual test sources in the basics are generally improving

2. New school populations involving a much broader range of abilities are now being served--schools are no longer dealing with a relatively select group

3. New standards of acceptable competency and new graduation requirements are being adopted and implemented

4. Many students are achieving at extremely high levels, often even higher than their counterparts in other countries which have a very selective educational system

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Local, state, and national test results, including NAEP

2. NSPRA and other studies on percentages of total and special populations being served

3. Examples of current local/state competency and performance requirements

4. UNESCO (S. Torsten Lund) studies; photo-stories of local/state examples of high group and individual achievement

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Collecting, analyzing, and publicizing statewide achievement data

2. Providing technical assistance to local districts in goal-setting, development of curricular and instructional materials, and evaluation strategies

3. Providing staff-development programs for PIOs

4. Publicizing successes and publicly analyzing failures in progress toward higher educational achievement levels

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: COST OF EDUCATION

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Schools cost too much."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. The primary costs are instructional, not administrative or "fringe and frill" programs

2. Many high-cost programs reflect legislative and judicial mandates, as well as desirable social commitments (e.g., programs for the handicapped)

3. Costs are inevitably and irresistably escalated by forces and decisions outside of school control (e.g., costs of transportation, utilities, insurance, mandated cost-of-living increases)

4. Significant measurable and reportable economies are being effected by improved management techniques

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Local and state data on instructional costs, compared to national norms

2. Breakouts of special-program costs attributable to state and federal requirements

3. Specific cost increases in areas outside of school control

4. Specific examples of savings engendered by good management practices

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information on local/state instructional and other costs

2. Providing technical assistance and staff development programs to help LEAs improve management practices

3. Appropriate monitoring activities to assure that legitimate public fiscal interests are being protected

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: TEACHER PREPARATION AND EFFECTIVENESS

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Teachers are generally poorly prepared and ineffective."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. The actual content and requirements of contemporary teacher education programs show marked improvement over traditional programs of just a few years ago

2. Evaluation procedures have been redesigned to put major emphasis on improvement of teacher competency

3. Staff-development programs are now tailored to meet specific needs of individual teachers and individual districts, rather than simply to meet requirements for additional hours of graduate credit

4. There are many local and state examples of notably successful teachers

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Actual examples of current teacher-preparation programs, with emphasis on competency-based requirements and internship experiences

2. Examples of state-required and locally-developed evaluation programs, with candid reporting of results

3. Exemplary staff-development programs actually in operation at the district level

4. Photo-stories of excellent teaching in action

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. More stringently enforcing and monitoring current regulations and requirements

2. Providing ample flexibility for approval of innovative programs of teacher education and for interpretation of certification requirements

3. Expanding technical assistance in staff development and evaluation programs

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: STUDENT DISCIPLINE AND BEHAVIOR

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Student discipline is lacking, and student behavior is often unacceptable."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. The problem is acknowledged, and schools are taking such steps as these: formal adoption of student rights and responsibilities documents; institution of more challenging and demanding school programs; providing more "alternative" programs

2. The home and the society share with the school responsibilities for mutual reinforcement of behavior patterns and standards

3. The vast majority of students do behave responsibly, and a significant number are highly responsible (publicize notable "success" stories)

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Examples of, or excerpts from, actual rights and responsibilities codes; descriptions of school programs which provide increasing challenges to students; descriptions of alternative programs for those students unable to fit into the regular school programs

2. Examples of community-service, work-study, and cross-age tutoring prorams which illustrate joint school-home-community cooperation

3. School records which support the contention that most student are not truant, disruptive, or subjected to disciplinary action

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Providing examples of materials needed in developing positive-action programs (e.g., student rights and responsibilities documents, alternative programs, home-school-community action programs)

2. Offering technical assistance to local districts in problem-clarification, program planning and implementation, and evaluation

3. Publicizing individual school success stories through departmental public information services

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: DROPOUTS

Message Being Received from the Public:

"The great number of dropouts means that the schools aren't trying hard enough or aren't meeting the needs of students."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. Reliable data on the problem as it exists (including differentiating between dropouts and "stop-outs" who return, and showing variety of causal factors)

2. Results of followup studies of graduates and nongraduates

3. Explanation of continuing-education programs for dropouts and reports of enrollments

4. Comparison of overall "holding power" of schools today with those of earlier decades and other countries

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Local dropout data; comparisons with state and national norms

2. Local/state followup studies conducted

3. Examples of varieties of continuing education opportunities for those who leave schools temporarily or permanently

4. AASA, NSPRA, UNESCO studies

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Making accurate and convincing data available to LEAs

2. Providing support for local and/or regional programs addressed primarily to meeting the continuing education needs of specific classes or dropouts

3. Encouraging and supporting local development of experimental or proven programs which identify potential dropouts and provide special-needs programs for them

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: LACK OF INFORMATION

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Parents and other citizens and taxpayers are not being kept informed about what the schools are doing and why."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. Rationale for proposed program changes

2. Reasons for resource allocations or reallocations

3. Actual results, both favorable and unfavorable, of specific programs

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. List of specific reasons why a program needs to be instituted, altered, or discontinued—e.g., new legislation, new federal requirement, results of survey of needs, results of evaluation conducted, etc.

2. Local/state/national comparisons on proportion of budget ordinarily devoted to specific functions or programs; special resource-allocation requirements dictated by law; cost/utility studies indicating desirability of reallocating resources

3. Results of multiple type of program evaluation (including disappointing studies showing no change, insufficient change, or negative change), utilizing both local and comparable state or national data

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Publicizing local/state/national studies which indicate rational need for program alterations and improvements

2. Publicizing legislative or judicial actions which mandate specific program changes

3. Reporting candidly on disappointing programs, but giving equally responsible emphasis to programs which do work (e.g., specific examples of quality programs and promising practices)

4. Providing technical assistance and staff-development opportunities to encourage dissemination, adoption, or adaption of good programs

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: NEEDS OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Special populations (e.g., handicapped, gifted, minorities) are being inappropriately or inadequately served by the schools."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. Actual data on programs being offered and resource allocations (staff, funds, facilities, materials, etc.) for these programs

2. Clear explanation of how these programs are designed: legal and judicial requirements, use of advisory committees, opportunities for community and parental input, etc.

3. Special-emphasis days or weeks devoted to public display of particularly successful programs--for example, business-industry cooperation in vocational education programs, demonstrations of what goes on in successful programs for handicapped, and specific success stories on gains made by minority individuals and groups

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Local/state/national comparisons on extent of, and resource allocations for, special-needs programs

2. Publications designed for public enlightenment available from each of the special-interest groups, especially the national organizations

3. State-generated or nationally-validated examples of particularly successful programs (including the novel, the eye-catching, and the human-interest stories!)

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Making available for LEA use popularized but accurate summaries of legal and judicial requirements for serving special populations

2. Providing to LEAs the entire range of technical-assistance support activities for improving special-population programs

3. Highlighting in SEA publications and news releases significant and telling examples of school successes in providing programs for special groups

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION

Issue: EDUCATIONAL COSTS/BENEFITS

Message Being Received from the Public:

"Educational efforts and costs expended haven't been worth it to society."

Messages Needing to be Sent to the Public:

1. Economic benefits of education are measurable and positive

2. Major scientific and technological advances benefitting society have resulted largely from investments in education

3. Many basic social advances, such as access to and equitable treatment in jobs, housing, and personal growth are reflections of more conscientious provision for access and equity in education

Data Sources for these Messages:

1. Results of studies by AASA, NSPRA, U. S. Chamber of Commerce and numerous business and academic economists

2. Reports of educational backgrounds of Nobel prizewinners and other inventors and developers of major scientific and technological breaktrhoughs

3. Reports from various government agencies (DOL, EEOC, OCR) and higher education organizations showing progress made in upward mobility and other economic, social, and educational gains made in recent years by members of the society as a whole, not just special groups

Alternatives for SEA Responsive Action:

1. Publicizing widely the data showing favorable cost/utility figures for public education

2. Encouraging local districts to solicit business/labor/industry efforts to pinpoint how education has positively affected economic and social well-being at the local level